



# NEWS RELEASE

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## *Background*

### **BEHAVIORAL NUTRITION A COMPREHENSIVE \$20 MILLION USDA RESEARCH PROGRAM**

#### **DEFINING THE PROBLEM**

America faces a nutrition crisis unlike any in its history. The crisis does not center on a particular disease but is the product of our behavior. Americans eat too much and exercise too little. These behaviors are manifesting into a serious public health problem. There is concern that the growing prevalence of obesity and its occurrence at earlier ages will increase the prevalence and earlier onset of such chronic diseases, as heart disease and diabetes. In addition, the growing number of elderly in the United States will present new nutrition and lifestyle challenges as our society struggles to meet ever greater health care costs.

#### **LINKING BEHAVIOR, DIET, AND HEALTH**

Through USDA's various research agencies, the Behavioral Nutrition Research Program will be established to identify what we know and do not know about individual food choices and physical activity behaviors and how to make the best use of research to improve the effectiveness of interventions.

The Agricultural Research Service maintains the largest publicly funded research program on human nutrition in the country. Through its network of human nutrition centers, ARS will focus on identifying the motivations for and barriers to behavioral change in eating patterns at the individual and community level, including: testing intervention strategies that target populations especially at risk for poor nutrition; developing strategies to start children on a lifetime of physical activity and healthy nutrition; and developing new indicators of chronic disease risk and dietary behavior to test the success of dietary advice.

The Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service has dedicated \$20 million under the Initiative for Future Agriculture and Food Systems to support research, education, and extension programs on behavioral nutrition and functional foods. The supported research will produce models of food and nutrition behavior, especially in at-risk populations such as older adults, low income individuals, and overweight individuals, and will use such models to produce behaviorally-based nutrition intervention programs. This program will also support research on development of foods with

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health attributes, the substantiation of health claims for functional foods, and consumer education about the health effects of eating certain foods. CSREES is currently reviewing proposals for this research program and expects to award grants in September.

The Economic Research Service is supporting internal and external research to understand the various determinants of food choices and diet quality, such as prices, incomes, and education; increased accessibility of fast food; demographic and cultural effects; participation in food assistance programs; nutrition knowledge; and changes in the labor force. Research will also focus on understanding both current and future health-related costs of poor food choices and consumers' reluctance to take into account future health benefits when making food choices.

## **HEALTHY ADVICE FOR A HEALTHY AMERICA**

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans issued by the United States Departments of Agriculture and Health and Human Services remain the gold standard for nutrition advice in the United States. The Dietary Guidelines 2000 for the first time contain a recommendation for physical activity as part of a healthy diet and lifestyle. As the Behavioral Nutrition Initiative evolves, we will understand more about how to make Dietary Guidelines 2000 even more effective - but we need to seize the opportunity today to educate the public about the dangers of the obesity epidemic and the benefits of proper nutrition.

The Partnership to Promote Healthy Eating and Active Living is a new public-private partnership to promote good nutrition in America. USDA will be working closely with public and private partners to highlight new paradigms for accomplishing positive behavior change in nutrition and physical activity. This new partnership will use the information gained from the behavioral research initiative to developing new messages about healthy diets and physical activity that will lead to an overall healthier American public.

The USDA Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) reaches many Americans with advice about dietary improvement, food safety, food resource management, and nutrition practices. In 1999, EFNEP extension specialists, working at the State and local levels, contacted nearly 700,000 individuals, 450,000 of whom were youths, about the benefits of proper nutrition. The program targets the populations at risk from improper diets and obesity and has proven effective in helping low-income citizens improve their diets and stretch their nutrition resources.

## **FOR MORE INFORMATION**

The Behavioral Nutrition Initiative is an ambitious program to improve the long-term health of all Americans and help our Nation as a whole deal with an aging population and rising health care costs. The success of the program lies with the researchers, universities, and educators who will discover new information and help set Americans on the path to a healthier tomorrow. For more information about these programs at the USDA, please visit: [www.reeusda.gov/ree/](http://www.reeusda.gov/ree/) or contact Phil Schwab at (202) 720-5923.

May 30, 2000